

Synapse
Henry Baker and Sherry Miller Hocking

Formerly University Community Union Video, and associated with Syracuse University. Synapse operated in an academic environment, and was not a separate non-profit organization. The founders were students and began by equipping the color studio of the cable television system at the University. Support came from the University and State funding. Eventually, prior to 1978, the programs of Synapse were organizationally divided. The Visiting Artist Program was affiliated with the Newhouse School of Communications. The student cable programming remained with the University Union. Synapse offered to artists access to high-end, broadcast quality post-production equipment. This service was generally not available to artists at other media arts centers, which were working with small-format equipment at the time. People associated with Synapse included Henry Baker, William Dargie, Paul Dougherty, Bob Burns, Jay Busch, Pat Faust, Carl Geiger (co-founder), Dean Irwin, David Ross, John Trayna, Bill Viola, Gail Waldron, Darrell Westlake, Lance Wisniewski.

“Synapse was founded in 1970 by a group seeking to experiment with a medium of staggering, untapped potential. We began as a campus cable system and television studio; we soon became the nerve center for creative audio visual expression on campus. Our work , then, was similar to the process that occurs in the human brain – that is, where electrical impulses carrying information jump across a space that exists between the nerve endings. This space is the synapse.” From a Synapse brochure.

Program Chronology Sherry Miller Hocking
A Visiting Artist Program at Synapse program brochure, 1974
Media Centers Move into the Eighties, Henry Baker program flyer, 1980

Program Chronology

1970-1974

Synapse operates as a student and community video center, an adjunct to the academic programs at Syracuse University.

Carl Geiger, along with several other Synapse members, and Franklin Morris, a Syracuse University music professor, collaborated to produce “Umbilicus” at a multi-media show at Automation House in NYC in March 1971. The environment included inflatables with video monitors.

In 1972, Synapse began operating in Watson Hall. Operations were managed by Gail Waldron, Bob Burns and Lance Wisniewski. Synapse recorded music concerts on campus and also one at Attica Prison; Synapse has a portable system which was used to record the feelings of inmates following the Attica riot. The color studio was built. Bill Viola joined Synapse.

Lance Wisniewski notes that important early conceptual underpinnings of Synapse included decentralization of media practice, two-way communication of information, and access. He also notes that there was continuing and on-going debate between those who favored more conventional approaches to programming and those who envisioned more experimental and creative approaches. (5)

In 1973 Henry Baker organized remote coverage for Richard Nixon’s second inauguration and the demonstrations in Washington. The program aired about Lyndon Johnson’s funeral were intercut with images of the Vietnam War. Cy Griffin shot “The Burning of Custer”, a verite style document of the Indians’ search for justice, a tape which was completed but not screened because of concerns about legal liability.

1974

Wishing to expand its offerings, Synapse seeks outside support from the New York State Council on the Arts. Synapse remained a program of Syracuse University, and received support for a visiting artists program. Artists included Tom DeWitt with a 3-D TV project; David Tudor's Rain Forest environment with Bill Viola; Dean and Dudley Everson integrated $\frac{1}{2}$ " video with other media graphics in a work about Indian culture; Rita Myers made use of the two-way cable capability in a performance wherein she was monitored while sleeping and viewers attempted to influence her subconscious, while sleeping; Dimitri Devyatkin edited Suggestopedia; Phil and Gunilla Mallory Jones created St Louis Blues.

"But the Visiting Artists Program was hardly the driving force behind our individual activities. Carl Geiger was busy designing and building new electronic image making tools and producing an elaborate experiment called "Multi-Origination Dance Piece". Gail Waldron was conducting workshops in women's video and a consultant for cable television. (5)

1975

With NYSCA support, Synapse began a program of providing broadcast-quality post-production support for artists' projects.

"Borrows, exchanges and rents $\frac{1}{2}$ " (AV and CV), 1" and 2" tapes. Makes equipment (including an experimental color television studio with campus-wide two-way cable system and two portable black and white studios as well as assorted $\frac{1}{2}$ " production equipment) available for use by University students, community residents, and artists. Offers technical assistance. Synapse cablecasts daily to the University community."

Video Resources in New York State, 1976

1976

Synapse is described in Video: State of the Art (1976) by Johanna Gill as a "well-equipped cable system at the University. Students there have received excellent technical training." Staff mentioned here were "Bill Viola, who is running Art Tapes 22 in Florence, Italy, and John Trayna, who is now technician at Electronic Arts Intermix in NYC". The cable system included "a color studio which was built by the founders of Synapse when they were students." (2)

1977

The Synapse Artist Visitation Program at Syracuse University was described in *Videoscope*, Vol. 1 No 2, 1977. Artists from all disciplines were invited to apply with a proposal. Stipends were available to artists in the Color Studio Production Program only. The equipment available in both programs was generally not available at other media centers which provided access to small-format rather than broadcast equipment.

There were two types of participation:

- The Color Studio Production Program at Synapse Watson Studio - The program was begun about 1973, and provided access to $\frac{1}{2}$ " portable color equipment, the two-way cable system and a studio equipped with color cameras, filmchain, broadcast quality switcher, chroma keyer, 1" recording decks, and processing and sync equipment.
- Post-Production Program at The Newhouse Communications Center - The goal of this program was high-quality editing, mixing or preparation for broadcast. Artists projects were selected for appropriate uses of the technology. Artists made application with a proposal; there was no stipend to the artist. Equipment included broadcast quality 2" editing system, 1" recorders, special effects generator, character generator, time base correctors and processing and sync equipment.

Synapse maintained master edits, and a tape collection with copies of works produced through the programs. They actively encouraged wide distribution of work, especially broadcast.

1978

Director, Henry Baker. Production Director, Carl Geiger.

Program provided access to $\frac{1}{2}$ ", $\frac{3}{4}$ ", 1" and 2" video equipment to individuals, by proposal. Facilities included a b&w studio, a color studio, and audio studio and editing room, and character generator, time base correctors, and film chain which allowed artists to use small-format videotapes, and other media such as film. It was one of the very few facilities where artists could have use of "high-end" production and editing technology. Synapse supported artists' projects which couldn't be accomplished at other video centers. Synapse engineers were the editors for the projects. Synapse had a videotape collection, and by 1978 were exploring the development of a distribution service.

-Access. N. Legge

Lance Wisniewski, in *Videography* (1978), outlines the following programs:

Syracuse University's two-way cable television system and color studio

Visiting Artist Studio Production Program

Broadcast Post-Production Program at Newhouse Communications Center

In 1978 the Color Production Program was suspended to assess its usefulness to the media community; the Post-Production Facility was recognized as unique and important, because access to sophisticated editing was difficult for artists to obtain. The editing system was significantly upgraded with an automated interface to the 2" decks, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. Synapse also recognized the importance of being able to use $\frac{3}{4}$ " feed decks directly in the editing system, since it was this format that was most often used by artists. Access to the studio and to engineers was provided to artists each evening, after the academic commitments of the day were met.

The Synapse program was supported by the University, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts.

To determine which artists' projects would receive Synapse support and access, Synapse began to change from an open policy of "first-come". To ensure that projects completed at Synapse received wide visibility, Synapse revised selection guidelines for visiting artists. Artists must have experiences with the video medium evidenced by past works, must have a specific need for the unique facilities, and demonstrate an ability to finish the project. Projects were expected to approach the medium in an innovative way, and artists were expected to be committed to broad public exposure and distribution of the program.

Artists retained rights over the programs produced. Ownership of work at this time was an area of considerable controversy. Artists who used television station facilities to complete works often found that they had few rights over the distribution and exhibition of the work. In part because Synapse was founded by working artists, Synapse believed in the artist's rights to his/her work. Synapse found that often the organization did not receive credit on works created with their facilities. This began to have a negative impact on support and ability to distribute works, and Synapse looked for a compromise in terms of rights and ownership. During the late 1970s Synapse began to modify their agreements with visiting artists to include some broadcast and cablecast potential.

Eventually the rights issues were resolved. Synapse retained a copy of the work, frequently the 2" master, and would provide dubs to the artist. Synapse had the right to lease completed work for three years, and paid royalties to the artist.

Program 1980

Executive Director: Henry Baker 1980

"Synapse is located on the campus of Syracuse University. This brings certain advantages, such as in-kind support and free space for the offices, and many restaurants, bars and other college-town amenities within walking distance for the user. (Says staffer Alex Swan, "We show our producers a good time.")

But there are also disadvantages. Synapse's main attraction - broadcast quality CMX computer editing, interface with 2" VTRs - is housed in and shared with the Public Communications School. Synapse grant recipients have access to the system from 6pm to midnight on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday only. As 2" editing is more cumbersome than 3/4", you should plan for several visits.

This was the only place we visited that served a national constituency, awarding about 30 grants annually. In addition to a rough edit, applications should include resume, project description with approximate number of edits and types of special effects needed, shooting ration, and budget. Extensive planning and dialogue with the staff will ensure satisfactory post-production.

A mandatory charge of \$20 per hour covers the services of a professional engineer, a CMX editor and work tape. Other goodies available are film (16mm and Super-8) and slide (35mm) to tape transfer capabilities, and promotion of your finished product for sale or rent through Synapse's tape catalog."

Synapse made about 30 grants each year to artists for use of the post-production facility, which represented about \$250,000 worth of services. Decisions about artists' applications were made by a peer review panel.

1981

Because it had never incorporated as an independent non-profit organization, Synapse received support from its funding agencies through Syracuse University. The University also supplied in-kind services to Synapse, but had become dissatisfied with the curricular component of their relationship with Synapse. While Henry Baker made a proposal that redefined the educational aspects of the Synapse Program, the University rejected the plan and elected to terminate the program. The reason provided by the University was that "revenues which accrue to the University from Synapse are inadequate to justify continuation." (3) Henry Baker resigned and Synapse, with assistance from Ralph Busch and Barbara Wood, incorporated and moved off the campus. The University retained the equipment and in November 1981 Synapse closed. The videotape collection of about 140 works was turned over to the Art/Media Study Department of the University, chaired by John Orentlicher. In 1982 Orentlicher tried to secure funding to let the University's Light, Audio and Media Program (LAMP) continue the distribution of tapes.

The ownership of the tapes was complex, since Synapse was not a legally separate entity from the University during most of its operating years. Media Alliance recommended that the University return the tapes to the artists, and that equipment in which NYSCA had an interest be returned to NYSCA to be redistributed.

Synapse videotapes are now held at Syracuse University Art Media Studies Department. The collection consists of over 500 titles, according to a survey conducted by Margaret Cooper, and compiled by Maria Troy for Video Data Bank in 1995.

Artists who used Synapse included Juan Downey (The Abandoned Shabono; Maidens of Honor), Tom DeWitt (This is TV America), Walter Wright (Works from the Experimental Television Center), Gary Hill, Bill Viola, Julia Heywood (This is a Test), Mary Ellen Brown (Body Tides), John Sanborn and Peter Gordon (Dancing Civilians), Peer Bode (The Electronic Image Parts 1 and 2), Louis Atkin (Mumbling is

a Way of Life), Bob Harris (The Villafana Clan), Ira Schneider, Les Levine, Carol Goss (Shinjuku), Laurie McDonald (The World's Largest: A Tape About Texas), Howie Gutstadt (Artists and Craftsmen Anthology), Alan Powell (Trip Through the Gods; Advanced Riding Bowl), Betsy Connors (The Gallery Piece), Karen Mooney (Coping with Herpes), Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn (Aphasia & Jargon), Christa Maiwald (Artists), Fred Simon (Portraits from the 2 O'Clock), Arthur Tsuchiya (Now what time is it really?), Ed Bowes (Better, Stronger), Dimitri Devyatkin (Russian Soul), Vibeke Sorensen (Monocules), Lillian Schwartz (Rituel), John Rogers (On the Boulevard), Philip And Gunilla Mallory Jones (Beyond the Mountains, More Mountains) and many others.

1. Fran Platt with Ann Volkes, Electronic Arts Intermix and Anthology Film Archives and Gerry Pallor, Young Filmmakers/Video Arts, "Upstate Report part one," Foundation for Independent Video and Film, New York City, The Independent, March 80, vol. 3, no. 2, page 12.
2. Lance Wisniewski, New Scene at Synapse. Videography. February 1978.
3. David Trend. "The Synapse Media Center". Videography. February 1982.
4. Synapse Catalog, 1976.
5. Lance Wisniewski. Synapse 1970-1977: A Personal History. Syracuse, Innervision Media Systems. 1980.

Innervision Media Systems, 1974 program announcement

A VISITING ARTIST PROGRAM AT SYNAPSE

Innervision Media Systems of Central New York will be initiating a visiting artists program soon. With the New York State Council's support, Innervision will be inviting 17 - 20 artists to spend one week in Syracuse. Artists will have this time to work out conceptual ideas and technical needs with the Innervision people in preparation for two full days of experimentation with the Synapse facility.

The members of Innervision have been working for over 2 years to build and develop Synapse into an experimental cable communications network. Synapse now has a complete color studio, other portable equipment, and a two-way cable network capable of simultaneously sending and receiving information. The system interconnects about 20 locations on the Syracuse campus.

Although many of you would like to come to Synapse to work solely with the color studio, we would encourage you, as artists, to consider experimenting with the whole communications laboratory - the cable network. While many people have been experimenting with new contents and forms on video tape, this program is proposed with the hope of broadening the scope of video experimentation to include the creation of live electronic environments via the cable, which encourages feedback in the experimental process. The program is by no means limited to video artists; we encourage all creative endeavours, but the work should take advantage of all the available facilities as opposed to simply recording another art form on video tape.

Our goal is to experiment with the potential for cable to interconnect environments. In light of the continuing development of sophisticated communications links, we need to understand more fully the implications of such processes and their relation to our future survival and growth on this spaceship. Although experimentation is often limited by lack of access to hardware, we have the basic tools and are limited only by the extent of our creative energies.

We encourage people to write a proposal detailing their ideas for utilizing, this unique laboratory. There are a number of students who participate in the operation of the system and who will be available to help in different ways. We would also hope that the artists who come here to work will be willing to lead a workshop with members of Innervision and interested people in the community. As part of our grant from the Council, we will be offering a \$150.00 stipend to each artist who participates in the program. Artists will provide their own housing, food, transportation, and video tape. Please mail all proposals and

other correspondence to us by February 1, 1974:

Media Centers Move into the Eighties Henry Baker 1980

Fourteen years ago Media Arts Centers began to spring up around the United States. Although hardly calling themselves as such at that time, they formed the initial links of what is becoming a network of facilities and programs dedicated to the promotion of independent and artistic film and video. Today we have more than 60 Centers in various cultural regions throughout the country. By far, the most dense population of Centers can be found in New York State. Much of the credit for this must go to the New York State Council on the Arts. The Council has funded and supported the growth of film and video to an extent which exceeds the entire Arts Council budgets of some states. We must also look toward New York City, the art capital of the world, as a historic determinant for such prosperous media activity.

Still in 1979, we have not resolved incipient tension between traditional art forms in their sumptuous display and video as art in its display on what is still considered by most to be a common, banal device: the television set. This tension is rooted in the problem all art has faced throughout history: the inability of the common person to perceive the world around him/her as art. That which is environment becomes invisible to all but the artist. And what, if anything, is more environment than is television for most Americans today?

In an attempt to alleviate some of this classic tension, and for other obvious reasons, Media Art Centers have formed regional suprastructures. Southern states have established COSMO, The Coalition of Southern Media Organizations. In New York State, groups have formed the Media Alliance. Growing out of two national conferences, there now exists a steering committee which is working toward the design of a National alliance.

These suprastructures, and those of the near future, serve to elevate the field and unify the constituency. A large amount of reshaping will occur during this period as groups share information and undertake collaborative endeavors. The outside world will hear a unified voice. Not only will this increase the general public's awareness of the role of Media Centers in society, but will also influence legislative decisions, opening up new avenues of funding and exposure.

The remarkable rate of growth of communications technology in the last few years will accelerate in the eighties. The advance of technology presents Centers with exciting new challenges and, concurrently, new options for software distribution. With fiber optics increasing channel capacity on cable TV and satellite access a reality, independent and artistic productions have that many more available outlets. Indeed, the CPB and PBS re-organizations may even provide a Public Broadcast System that can be utilized without first going through a labyrinth.

The greatest service that Media Centers offer society is a true access point for the public; a point where one can participate and respond to the media. Historically, the public's only option has been to absorb the spoon-feeding from major networks.

Commercial TV will not be supplanted in the eighties. It will continue to penetrate the vast majority of American homes. Although the big networks put little stock in the activities conducted at centers, the creative and innovative work which is done will make inroads on independent stations and on the various other technologies available.

As we enter the next decade, we at Synapse see bright prospects for Media Centers. The impact on society will be extensive, powerful, and not a moment too late. The opportunity for people express themselves through the media is here.

-Henry Baker, Executive Director